DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 542 CS 216 022

AUTHOR	Rhodes, Barbara C.
TITLE	TA Training: The Process of Becoming.
PUB DATE	1997-03-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cooperation; English Instruction; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Teaching Assistants; Training Methods; Training Objectives
IDENTIFIERS	*Central Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of having Teaching Assistants (TAs) seems to be 3-fold: (1) to provide a system of load-relief for senior faculty who are completing research; (2) to help offset the operational costs of the administration of higher education; and (3) to regularly train a body of people who will influence the future face of academia. A positive experience for the TA enhances the reputation of particular departments and institutions which then becomes a built-in recruitment tool. The TAs' value to the university depends essentially on their training; the training must be meaningful and focused and valued for its commitment to teaching well. The philosophy of the Department of English and Philosophy at Central Missouri State University is to model for the TAs as many different authentic scenarios as possible and have TAs come into their own style and method of getting the same information across to the students with positive results. For example, each August before the start of school, the Director of Freshman Composition (supervisor of TAs) conducts a syllabus workshop which centers on: the text, the syllabus, the scheduling of assignments, the first few days, and includes collaboration in working out the first four weeks of a syllabus. Funding for TAs to present conference papers and salary considerations are also discussed. The best of all worlds is when TAs can work collaboratively with their supervisor in the process of becoming educators of merit. (CR)

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TA Training: The Process of Becoming

The purpose of having Teaching Assistants (TAs) seems to be three-fold: (1) to provide a system of load-relief for senior faculty who are completing research, (2) to help offset the operational costs of the administration of higher education, and (3) to regularly train a body of people who will influence the future face of academia. Load-relief to do research is a luxury that professors at Universities have come to expect; it is good for both professor and Institution, and cutting costs is a fact of life. However, another purpose for having TAs is to promote a particular discipline to prospective teachers, to show them the positive side of helping others to learn. These teaching assistants are our future teachers, and we should give them the experience of being accepted as apprentices, colleagues sharing in our combined efforts of giving students the best education we can --hopefully their money's worth.

A positive experience for the TA, in turn, enhances the reputation of particular departments and institutions which can become a built-in recruitment tool. It is vital to the well-being of the University if the teaching assistants know they are necessary and appreciated--not exploited. Realistically, it is questionable how some Departments would function if they did not have TAs.

Finally, the purpose of the TAs and their value to the University depends essentially on their training; the training must be meaningful and focused and valued for its commitment to teaching well.

To reach this desired end, in the Department of English & Philosophy, at Central Missouri State University (CMSU), position descriptions for both, the Director of Freshman Composition and her assistant have been created. Included in the position

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description for the Director of Freshman Composition, is a selection process for TAs. The selection process consists of: (1) an essay to be read and graded; the essay is in response to a prompt based on an article handed out to freshman students; (2) a list of 50 sentences to be corrected using the Bedford Handbook; (3) the prospective TA's philosophy of learning written in one - two pages; (4) a formal application which asks for an official transcript and three reference letters. This screening process is reviewed by three Department Administrators: The Director of Freshman Composition, The Coordinator of the Graduate Program, and The Coordinator of the TESOL program. Always there is a personal interview.

Only recently, the assistant to the Freshman Composition Director was added when the purpose of TAs was shown to the Chair of the Department and the Dean of Arts and Sciences. It was also pointed out that our Department often has 10-13 Teaching Assistants per semester. One person cannot possibly observe and train and be responsible for this many assistants. We also implemented a mentoring program in which each teaching assistant is paired up with a full-time instructor to visit each other's classes. Our philosophy is not to tell the TAs that "this is the correct style and method." Instead, our philosophy is to model for the TAs as many different authentic scenarios as possible and have the TA come into his or her own style and method of getting the same information across with positive results. It is critical thinking at its finest.

Each August about two weeks before the start of school, the Director of Freshman Composition conducts a syllabus workshop. The Assistant Director and the Dual Credit Coordinator are on hand to help out also. All new Dept. TAs and Dual Credit Teachers in the High Schools are invited (lunch included). At the workshop, the discussion centers on: the text, the syllabus, the scheduling of assignments, the first few days, and includes collaboration in working out the first four weeks of a syllabus; there is usually

enough time built in for interaction between the assistants, so they can get to know each other too. In the afternoon session the Dual-Credit instructors are able to share their concerns with each other because their rural schools are so scattered that collaboration during the school year is negligible. The following day, the assistants are scheduled for a library orientation, and an orientation for the Department's Office procedures. These two days are the most valuable of all in the training of the TAs regarding Department expectations, the Director's expectations, and it sets the tone for their expectations of themselves.

Another milestone reached at CMSU is funding for TAs to present papers at Conferences if they are presenting jointly with a professor in their discipline.

The next goal that is important to us is the salary of TAs. It is appalling to expect TAs to live on $2500 per semester, or $500 per month (Aug.- Dec; Jan.- May). We submitted a proposal and a justification only to be turned down, even officially published in the school newspaper, with the excuse that "TAs should consider themselves lucky to be given training."

Even with very little pedagogical theories years ago, we all read Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, which is still relevant; and the common text was Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, an excellent text then, and *I* can still imagine using it today in Freshman English, but few do.

The new TAs have a different text, Reid's Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers, generally a process approach to writing, but in addition to the syllabus workshop, they also have an intensive week-long "Excellence in Teaching" training program in which they are introduced to the latest pedagogical methods and teaching theories; they have the elaborate theories of Elbow, Knoblach and Brannon, Berthoff, Perry, and the powerful testimonies and ethnographies of Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary and Shirley Brice Heath's Ways With Words. Still, in their first semester the new TAs have a natural resistance to theory while they seek to

understand the practical and logistical concerns of drop/add and communicating with an unknown quantity--freshman students. It isn't that the theory will not be embraced later, but in the beginning, the theoretical and the pragmatics of pedagogy are an overwhelming amount of materials to sort. Once the TAs are able to sort through this maze of information, they crave theory which is offered in various texts, such as, St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing, Background Readings to the Bedford Handbook for Writers, The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, and in their coursework.

The Director of Freshman Composition is the supervisor of TAs, and shares anxieties similar to theirs in her responsibility for their assignments (in and out of class), syllabi, pedagogy, their personal well-being, and their evaluations. Jane Tompkins' "Pedagogy of the Distressed," helps us to sort and quiet these anxieties and also helps us to determine what specifics should be included in TA Training. Most of all, we should endeavor to discover how to meet the needs of the students--it is their classes, their money, and their education; we are there to facilitate their successes, an idea which should be at the heart of TA Training.

Sometimes one's intuitive theories lead us in the right direction, too. When I was first a supervisor, I had six TAs that I had inherited, and seven brand-new TAs. It was a transitional semester, so there was no time for planning. The former supervisor went on to another directorship, and except for their "excellence in teaching" seminar, I had them for about an hour to talk about a syllabus and their text and their fears. The new TAs were there and perhaps only one of the former TAs attended. There was not a feeling of camaraderie among the TAs, a situation that I found most uncomfortable, but somehow I had to deal with it.

When I asked myself what could I do to get to know them and have them get to know me, I decided I would ask them to do a teaching journal each week, which I responded to every week. They

each had to write one journal article, but I wrote 13 responses. I also decided that they had to have some kind of weekly training. So, we established a common hour to meet and discuss various articles I gleaned through current composition journals. (College English, 4 C's, written communication, basic writing, etc.). The former TAs were having a tough time of it--resisting the new order of things, while the new TAs were struggling to fit in. Two or three former TAs graduated in December leaving three to graduate the following May. Mostly, the former TAs attended meetings sporadically, but I noticed the new TAs clung to me tightly.

The teaching journals were a godsend! Where did I get the insight to do this? The new TAs poured out their hearts while the former TAs were impressive with their sense of who they were, their knowledge, their command of teaching strategies and pedagogical methods. I learned so much, about them, about me, and about rhetoric--particularly tone. However, I also learned how important it is to have a sound training program for TAs. They feel responsible, and they are responsible. Indeed, it is a heavy burden to know that you are to a large degree responsible for the education of freshman students who have paid good money for their education.

During the third week of the semester, we had a two-hour grading session using the analytical scoring guide; this session was conducted close to the time they would be gathering those first papers--close enough to pay strict attention but before panic had set in.

I am definitely proud of the progress we have finally made; the camaraderie is excellent, the TAs are all supportive of each other, they help each other, they work at being the best teachers in the world, and I couldn't be happier. In the fall, when we had a get together at my house, we all brought food, they played games, the house was filled with them--it was wonderful, and they seemed to be having the time of their lives. This semester, in response to their evaluations, I am doing the teaching journals

again, and they are leading discussions over current pedagogical articles found in composition journals in their weekly TA meetings, and oral reports are summarized and handed in to everyone with a copy of the article. We have a few days in our semester when there are no assigned readings. Those times are open for guest speakers, or special topics discussion. Our first special topic discussion was on "issues of diversity" after I had attended a 3-day workshop on multiculturalism in the classroom.

Of course, at the mid-point of the semester, the TAs will be officially evaluated by the Director of the program, and at the end of the semester the TAs will write three separate items: (1) an evaluation of their supervisor to be handed in to the Department Chair; (2) a self-assessment of themselves as TAs to be handed in to their supervisor; and (3) an evaluation of the teaching journal as a pedagogical tool for training, also to be handed in to their supervisor.

What have I learned? I have learned that it is "smart" to find out what others are doing in sister schools; that it helps tremendously to know veteran supervisors like Mike Hogan at Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO), who understood my concerns from day one; that it is not impossible to make important changes like more salary for TAs, or funding for TAs to go to conferences, but it does require diligence, and sometimes alternatives have to be created. We must learn to ask the right questions: What kind of instruction do we value for our freshman students? Do we believe enough in the value of composition to want our freshman students to have the best teaching we can give them? A "yes" answer means we have to give the best training our resources will allow; we have to be resourceful and work together. I try not to overwork the already overworked Teaching Assistants, particularly in light of their low salaries and limited amount of time. However, I have also learned that a little encouragement goes a long way; their courses are where they learn the bulk of their theories and pedagogies which helps me too because

everything can not be learned in a weekly TA meeting. This frees me to be a facilitator and mentor, someone who is always available for quick answers or long-term solutions to tough compromises; I am free to assist with the practical issues of dealing with students day-to-day, week-to-week.

So it is the best of all worlds when the new TAs can work collaboratively with their supervisor in the process of becoming educators of merit, harmonizing with a sense of sympathetic understanding, yet maintaining academic standards that will benefit us all. TA training is not about perfection; it's about competence.